



Defense Research Comment

Soviet Troop Morale in Afghanistan (U)

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The nature of the insurgency environment in Afghanistan can be viewed as a factor which probably aggravates morale and disciplinary problems. The extreme climatic and terrain conditions present in Afghanistan certainly call for very different approaches to the normal daily routine of the Soviet soldier and impact considerably on his performance. Newly arrived conscripts complain of acclimatization difficulties and of the lack of appropriate clothing and footwear for the rugged terrain. A degree of uncertainty is present for the Soviet soldier in Afghanistan at all times, for he is not fighting the conventional enemy that he has been indoctrinated to expect. The hit-and-run, ambush tactics of the Mujahideen force the Soviet troops to exercise increased vigilance, to expect the unexpected.

The 40th Army in Afghanistan is performing a mission quite different from the mechanized warfare the Soviet Armed Forces are structured and trained for, and it has been slow in adapting to the Afghan environment. Moscow has also been slow in correcting its counterinsurgency shortcomings. As a result, many problems persist, and one of these is the unsuitability of the Soviet conscript for counterinsurgency warfare.

According to various reports, the *stariki* practices in the Soviet Armed Forces

carried to extremes are the basis for much of the antagonism and physical abuse experienced by the young recruits in Afghanistan. It is common, for example, for senior conscripts (the *stariki*), regardless of rank, to subjugate newly arrived soldiers. The conscripts see the main purpose of the daily morning inspections as a means to oppress the rookie soldiers. Only the recruits are hard at work during a typical day in garrison, taking care of the older soldiers' trucks and equipment, bringing them cigarettes and drinking water. Failure to please the *stariki* can result in swift retribution and physical abuse.

Ethnic differences appear to generate some problems and antagonism among the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Reports indicate that the Russians, Belorussians, and Ukrainians, who dominate the officer corps, feel superior to the other nationalities, especially the Central Asians. This in part may be made worse in Afghanistan as a result of the close ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic affinity of the Uzbeks and Tadzhiks to the local population. There is evidence to suggest that nationality cliques are formed in the units, resulting in rivalry and arguments between the groups.

Many of the ordinary Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan have only one thought, that is to stay alive. It interests them little that they are killing the Mujahideen and Afghan population, for their main objectives are to save themselves, to be demobilized, and return home to the Soviet Union. Apparently, some soldiers give little thought to the reasons for the war and show little evidence of patriotism. They seek to fulfill their "internationalist duty" in noncombat jobs such as vehicle repair, storage areas, or kitchen duty.

The possibility of service in Afghanistan has apparently worsened the historical problem of draft dodging in the Soviet Union. With the recent *glasnost* (openness) campaign, stories of draft dodging have surfaced in the Soviet media, and Soviet military leaders have leveled charges accusing some young people of a class-conscious attitude toward military service. Many ordinary Soviet citizens feel that the burden of military service in Afghanistan has fallen on the sons of the working class and believe that sons of the elite avoid the draft by enrolling in universities. Some draftees persistently evade the callup notices, produce fictitious medical certificates, and develop "nerves" to avoid service in Afghanistan.

Soviet soldiers find living conditions in Afghanistan to be even worse than those encountered in the Soviet Union. Comforts are generally few for combat troops. Reports indicate that at times housing is poor and cots, blankets, and messkits are in short supply.

Young conscripts are not permitted access to the Afghan villages and bazaars and have no chance of being granted home leave in the Soviet Union. Many seek out others of the same nationality as a kind of bond to something known and familiar!